

## ***FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** June 14, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Ash Coulee Conservation Easement (R6)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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### **Background:**

FWP proposes to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on 3,400 acres of deeded land northwest of Glasgow. This project was endorsed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission in March of 2015, but due to the extended timeframe of the project and a 1,400-acre reduction in the project, the department is seeking endorsement of the project in its current form. The property, referred to as Ash Coulee, consists of 3,400 acres of native grass and shrublands and is bisected by Ash Coulee. The ranch provides productive riparian, native shrub and mixed grassland habitats, all of which have been identified as state priority habitats. The area includes critical winter range for antelope and mule deer, and is part of the Sage Grouse Connectivity Core Area.

Ash Coulee lies adjacent to the FWP Vandalia Wildlife Management Area, Bureau of Reclamation property, publicly accessible DNRC land, the FWP Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement, and two properties enrolled in Block Management, which when combined totals 8,914 contiguous acres of habitat and access conservation efforts. A conservation easement would protect productive blocks of riparian and sagebrush habitats from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and other recreational opportunities.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results:**

FWP has publicly scoped the project under its original description and endorsement. FWP received 7 seven total comments, all of which were in support of the project, with one comment stressing the need to ensure adequate hunter days on the property. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would continue appropriate negotiations, analysis, and public review processes.

### **Alternatives and Analysis:**

Proposed Action: Purchase the 3,400-acre Ash Coulee Conservation Easement. FWP would develop a rest-rotation grazing system to improve wildlife habitat while also securing permanent public access.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale:**

To conserve the high resource values and public recreation opportunities on this land, FWP recommends endorsement by the Commission, allowing FWP to proceed with the further development of this opportunity.

### **Proposed Motion:**

I move the Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to continue negotiations and to conduct analysis and associated public review.